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Rio Nuevo needs the Fourth Avenue underpass

The Star's view: Construction efforts on the Gulf Coast and in China pushed up the estimated cost of the underpass. But delays will negatively affect Rio Nuevo.

Continuing delays in the construction schedule for the Fourth Avenue Underpass are disappointing at best. At worst, the delays imply a distressing level of incompetence.

The city always seems to have another semi-plausible explanation for the delays.

In August 2004, we were told that work on the underpass would begin in January 2005. But by the time January rolled around, the city said work on the underpass would have to wait until the Downtown Greyhound bus terminal was moved out of the way.

That was perfectly understandable.

Then we discovered the terminal could not be moved according to schedule because the site selected as the temporary location had a tendency to get badly flooded during heavy rains. Modifications were necessary.

In August, there was some good news. The old Greyhound terminal still hadn't been demolished, but city officials were convinced work on the underpass could begin in September.

The date was important, because next summer the state will begin widening Interstate 10, a project that will last three years and create major traffic disruptions.

Not to worry, said city officials - a good deal of the Fourth Avenue Underpass construction will be out of the way by the time the I-10 widening begins. There may be some overlap, but it will be relatively brief.

This, it turns out, was wishful thinking.

Earlier this week, a story by the Star's Sarah Garrecht Gassen reported that work on the Fourth Avenue Underpass will be delayed for at least another five months because the only bid the city received on the project was \$10 million higher than the estimated \$21.5 million cost the city had anticipated.

What this means is that work on the underpass connecting Downtown with the Fourth Avenue entertainment and shopping district will almost certainly coincide with the traffic mess created by the I-10 widening. It also means prolonged chaos for Downtown merchants waiting to reap the benefits of the Rio Nuevo project, Tucson's cultural and redevelopment effort.

We would like to believe the old adage that every construction project ends up taking longer than expected. Delays are inevitable. But we are also reminded that some very large projects - construction of the I-19 interchange, for example - were completed ahead of schedule.

What went wrong with the Fourth Avenue Underpass schedule? The latest explanation comes from Brooks Keenan, engineering manager for the city transportation department.

Keenan said a building boom in China and reconstruction on the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast have increased the cost of building materials.

In addition, the city was hampered by having received a bid from only one company, which in effect put it in a take it or leave it position.

Mayor Bob Walkup, ever the optimist, was not overly concerned about the delay.

"Everybody has a lot of work, so the people who are bidding projects are saying, 'I'm full, but I'll bid it high,' " Walkup said. "It's probably the right thing to do to wait for the construction market to cool off a bit and go back for a new bid."

Maybe. But we can't help wondering whether the specs used in the original cost predictions weren't off to begin with. Certainly we can understand a bid coming in high, but \$10 million over estimated costs seems extreme.

Setting aside the various facile explanations, the fact remains that this crucial aspect of Downtown renewal unhappily remains in limbo.

- *S.N.*